

“As Is”

(2 Samuel 11: 1-15; Psalm 51: 1-12; Mark 6: 35-44)

I read a book a while ago with a magnificent title. It's called, “Everybody's Normal—Till You Get to Know Them.” Written by John Ortberg, who is a minister, teacher and a master of wacky book titles. The book was written primarily to help in the difficult task of building community—*church* community in particular—with people who are disappointingly or perhaps shockingly *like ourselves*, which is to say, a little quirky, maybe rough around the edges, occasionally troublesome and generally sinful. The book is a good read, well, if you don't mind being forced to look in a mirror all the time you're reading. But what I find most exciting in these pages are the examples drawn from the biblical text.

Think about it. This is the Bible in a nutshell. Think of the Old Testament in particular and stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and then stories of leaders like Moses or King Saul. Those characters look great *from a distance*. Their portraits are larger than life. Their names often sound magical and their reputations truly heroic, until you get a closer look. And for some strange reason, the Bible is *always* giving us that *closer* look. Think especially about our Old Testament lesson this morning, where we just saw the mighty King David—the divinely appointed, blessed-from-boyhood, super-hero, heart-throb King David—do a prize-winning swan-dive from the tip-top of the totem pole all the way down to the lowest rung on the ladder. David was doing so wonderfully well, until we saw that close-up sequence. He was so much better than just “normal” but in one brief episode it all came crashing down—from hero to weirdo, from saint to sinner, from king to cretin to crook.

It puzzles me, deeply, why the Bible wants to tell us stuff like this. It puzzles me so deeply that I don't want to wrestle with this one alone. So, you're going to get in on it too. This morning you squirm and wiggle with the question too. Why on earth, when telling the story of a cultural hero and national founder like David, would the biblical writers want us to see him *in his knickers*? I will apologize for saying the word “knickers” in Church—my mother would swat me if she could reach—but it's not exactly out of context in *this* story. And in fact, in the story we read about David just two weeks ago, where he was dancing before the Ark, you might recall that he was wearing substantially less than his knickers! Again, why do you suppose his official biographers want us to see him caught in the act, with his hand in the cookie jar or worse, going from worse to still worse by the lies he uses to cover up his sin, and by the still bigger crime he uses to hide the first one? Why does the Bible *want* to show us this stuff?

This problem, and our question this morning, didn't start with David, by any means. Abraham, the patriarch of all Patriarchs, was playing favourites between his sons Isaac and Ishmael, with the result that those two brothers were estranged from each other, and what Abraham did to Ishmael and his mother—sending them out into the desert with inadequate provisions—wasn't particularly nice. Isaac has an *identical* character flaw: he plays favourites between Esau his firstborn and Jacob-the-lying-cheat-mama's boy, with the effect that the wrong one gets the inheritance, and the brothers are

bitter enemies for twenty years. Jacob, for his part, keeps up that family tradition: he sets his favourite, Joseph, over against all eleven other brothers and they promptly try to kill him, but they settle for selling him into slavery.

Here comes the question again: Why on earth do the Hebrew historians *want* us to see their cultural heroes in such un-heroic moments? Why do you suppose the Word of God—which is meant, I think, to draw us *higher* and *closer* to God—would want to shock and disgust us with the very part of our nature that is farthest from God? Can you make sense of that?

Well, here's something that may help as you wrestle with the question. Keep in mind that these questions are definitely not *rhetorical* questions. They're not just tricky brainteasers. They're quite real, and there *is* an answer. It's a good one, and it goes something like this. The Word of God, and all the human writers who took up a pen to convey it, is trying to establish a deep theological truth, and that is: *Everybody is weird!* All of us. All we like sheep have gone astray, each to his or her own depravity of choice. All of us have habits we can't or won't control, past deeds we can't undo and probably won't even admit, deep flaws we can't correct if only because we won't even look at them. And this is the cast of characters God has to work with. It's the same cast of characters God has always had. All of them *weird*. They may look pretty good at a distance. Some of them might talk pretty good *from* a distance. But when you get closer, when you get to know them, when you hear the words behind the words, when you see the warts and moles, "normal" goes right out the window and "weird" is exactly what's left. The Word of God tells it like it is and shows us the truth, not just about God, but even more so about us. All we like sheep.

Well, here's a little sneak preview from Ortberg's book, and this will furnish the key idea that I want to apply to our story about King David. Ortberg starts off with this analogy:

"In certain department stores you will find a section of merchandise available at greatly reduced prices. The tip-off is a particular tag you will see on all the items in that area. Each tag carries the same two words—*as is*. This is a nice way of saying, 'These are damaged goods.' Sometimes they're called *slightly irregular*. The store is issuing you fair warning: 'This is the department of Something's-Gone-Wrong. You are going to find a flaw here: a stain that won't come out; a zipper that won't zip; a button that won't butt—there *will* be a problem. These items are *not normal*. But we're not going to tell you where the flaw is. You'll have to look for it. So, when you find it—and you *will* find it—don't come whining and snivelling to us, because there is a fundamental rule when dealing with merchandise in this corner of the store: 'No returns. No refunds. No exchanges.' If you were looking for perfection, you walked down the wrong aisle. You have received fair warning. If you want this item, there is only one way to obtain it. You must take it *as is*."

Ortberg goes on: "When you deal with human beings, you have come to the 'as is' corner of the universe. Think for a moment about someone in your life. Maybe the person you know best, love most. That person [pardon me for saying] is *slightly irregular*. That person comes with a little tag: *There's a*

flaw here. A streak of deception, perhaps, or a cruel tongue, maybe a mean spirit or an out-of-control temper. I'm not going to tell you what it is or where it is, but it's there. So, when you find it—and you will find it—don't be surprised. If you want to enter a relationship with this person, there is only one way and that is: "As is."

"The most painful part of this kind of thinking, of course, is realizing that *I* am in the "as- is" department as well. Throughout history, human beings have resisted owning up to that little tag and have tried their best to snip it off [but it's around behind and hard to reach.] We try our best to separate the world into normal, healthy people (like us) and difficult weird people [like everyone else out there.] We all want to look normal and want to think of ourselves as normal, but then the Bible comes along and the writers of Scripture insist that no one is 'totally normal' —at least not as God defines normal. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

It's a painful moment in Hebrew history and in the biblical text when King David loses his "normal" and really gets "as is." He had been such an inspiring model of leadership and trusting faith, such an example of courage and integrity under fire. Was it just a mere moment of weakness that let him down, or maybe the wily power of feminine charms that bewitched him and pulled him aside? Did something or someone do it to him? Not a chance. Not for David any more than for us. It's our human nature. That flaw was there from the start. That flaw does catch us, again and again. Though it's great fun to lay blame on anything or anyone else, the blame tag is already on us. That tag reads, "as is."

David's denial and attempted cover-up was a real piece of work. It almost looks like he was doing an impression of Bill Clinton's famous "I did not..." speech. David dug a pit for himself deeper than the one Richard Nixon tried to hide his White House tapes in. And then, while trying to save his own dirty skin, he sent an innocent man out to look for Jimmy Hoffa. Remember what David said when he learned that King Saul was dead? "How the mighty have fallen!" That little chorus applies beautifully, if not *prophetically*, to David himself. It's hard to believe that David was new to this sin business, because he was so good at it! I don't know if this is true, but it sure seems like *famous* people get even *more* "as is" than the rest of us. This part *is* true, however: that little flaw we start out with, if untreated, will always be growing and getting bigger, tearing deeper, doing more damage, drawing more and more people into its circle, infecting more people with its disease, wrecking more relationships and societies.

The Bible, in virtually every book and from each of its writers, affirms that God takes us "as is" and can do some pretty amazing things with us, if we cooperate with that process. We need to admit our flaw, view it realistically and be honest about it, but God will take us and work with us and in us. He can redeem us and forgive us in spite of our flaw, and better still, he will enter fully into relationship with us so that we can do the same with him. You see, that's what our flaw usually works *against*—it makes it hard, if not impossible, to enter freely and fully into a relationship with anyone. But God opens up this possibility, and he does it ever so dramatically in Jesus Christ, who was just as real and human as you or me. This, in fact, is a pretty good proof of the humanity of Jesus, that so many of his acquaintances,

opponents and even a few of his colleagues thought *he* was *really* weird. (“Turn the other cheek? Forgive your enemies?” Come on, tell me *those* teachings aren’t weird!)

Yet in Christ, God is also and at the same time perfectly himself, perfectly holy, pure and powerful. When he embraces our “as is” character flaw and dares to touch our internal moral rot, something changes, something miraculous happens. The flaw may not be fully removed or magically neutralized, but we are enabled to get *beyond* it, to get *over* it, to get on with really relating to him and to each other in spite of our flaw, in spite of our fears and suspicions. And then Jesus adds the Holy Spirit to that process, to keep us moving forward, to keep us learning and growing rather than falling back again into the old pits and traps that snagged us before. So, you see the flaw won’t always get the better of us, and we won’t be powerless when it starts acting up. This, I think, is the Good News in a nutshell, that in Christ, God can take an *as is* cast of characters like us, like those disciples, and like most of the characters in the Bible, and he can work with us, he can relate with us and within us. Christ doesn’t just beckon to us from a safe distance or from behind a fence, he comes right in, up close and personal, and he starts this relationship moving, he enables us to enter and enjoy relationship with him, and then with each other, right here in the fellowship of faith.

King David may not have been having his finest moment in our story today. His little flaw went way out of control, and it caught other people into its web and dragged them down into its damage. But I note that God kept the relationship going, and we’ll see in subsequent readings that God cared enough to *confront* David and *correct* him, so that their relationship could actually be strengthened.

In our gospel story this morning, there’s another aspect of God’s Good News for “as is” people. Those people who followed Jesus around the lake and from town to town, who came as often as they could to hear him speak, they also came *as is*. In today’s lesson, they came hungry and empty, with no provision for what they might need later, not exactly thinking smart or planning ahead, neither were they able to purchase or otherwise procure what they would need to sustain them. Jesus can work with them, too. He takes what meagre offering he can find, and from that *very small* basket he fills all. Jesus can work with crowds just as he does with individuals, *as is*. And when he’s done, they *will* be different, they will be filled, all of them, especially the ones who, like us, might be a little weird as well as hungry.

Church folk sometimes like to see themselves, think of themselves and show themselves to others in somewhat better than “as is” condition. Some of the folks outside the church might be fooled by that, some of the time. In reality, of course, our strength is in our weakness, just like Paul said. It’s in our “as is” condition that Christ can and *will* work with us, and he needs our honesty in this as well as our willingness.